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Abstract

A critical review of Bernard Knox's literary analysis of Sophocles' "Oedipus the King" in a four-lesson film series is offered largely as a "warning" to high school teachers. Central to the criticism is the author's belief that Professor Knox has imposed a reductive and marginal interpretation on the play which tends to obscure rather than enlarge the student's understanding. His interpretation of a selected portion of a choral ode is harshly criticized for inadequately providing the basis for his simplistic appraisal of the meaning behind the play. Further commentary is directed to Sophocles' Athens, Oedipus' heroic search, prophets and prophencies, Oedipus and Apollo's prophecy, Oedipus as a man of destiny, and divergent interpretations. (RI)

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The *Oedipus* Films: A Review

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OF ALL the audio-visual materials available to the high school literature teacher, few have proved to be such sturdy favorites as the series of three films on *Our Town*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Hamlet*. These films, each consisting of four lessons, were produced by the Council for a Television Course in the Humanities for Secondary Schools and filmed and distributed by Encylopaedia Britanica Films, Inc. The dramatic scenes in the films are done by the Stratford Shakespearean Festival Foundation of Canada and interpretations are offered, respectively, by Mr. Clifton Fadiman, Professor Bernard Knox, and Professor Maynard Mack, the last two of Yale University.

In many respects these films are models of what audio-visual education should be, and each year more and more secondary schools seem to be making them and the works they deal with a significant part of their students' literary experience. Since most school systems have bought the films, it is impossible to estimate how many students see them each year; but it is probably sufficient to note that college instructors find each year that an increasing proportion of their freshmen have seen these filmed lessons. This is all good — or at least as good as the films are. The first and third I am not competent to judge, but, in the four filmed lessons on the *Oedipus*, there are so many omissions and distortions, so many difficulties involved in Professor Bernard Knox's interpretation of the play, that the whole production tends to obscure rather than enlarge the student's understanding of Sophocles' great tragedy. Knox's intentions are very admirable: he wants to coax a "meaning" out of the *Oedipus* that will fit the facts of the play and will also relate immediately and effectively to the experience of an eleventh or twelfth grader. But to these laudable ends, he has subjected the play to an analysis so special, so curious, so tendentious, that it can only evoke yelps of protest from those who share Knox's high regard for Sophocles. Following the order of the filmed lessons, I should like to offer some comments on Knox's analysis, less as rebuttal to him than as a warning to high school teachers to be aware of what Knox is doing with — and to — Sophocles' play.

Sophocles' Athens

After some preliminaries about Greece in his first lesson, the "Age of Sophocles," Knox takes us at once into the exciting intellectual life of fifth-century Athens. He describes the tonic effect that the victories over Persia had on the Athenian spirit (odd that neither here nor anywhere else does he mention the Peloponnesian War or the plague that had just struck Athens: more on this point later); he rightly points out that this period saw a clash between the new and the old in the minds of the Athenians, and he suggests some of the questions that troubled enlightened Athenians of Sophocles' time. Here the Greek Sophist and skeptic Protagoras has pride of place, and Knox quotes his familiar "Man is the measure of all things." Unfortunately, Knox fails to quote the second half of this puzzling statement (what, for example, did Protagoras include under *things*?), "of things that are that they are, of things that are not that

they are not," and, without mentioning the usual interpretation, namely, that reality is relative to each individual, goes on to give it a radically humanistic interpretation, even nerving himself to say, "He meant . . . that man's intelligence is capable of finding the answers to all the secrets of life." Now there is no proof whatsoever that Protagoras meant anything of the sort; certainly, he never said anything like that, and Knox's *meaning* seems totally unlike the mild skeptic we meet in Plato's *Protagoras*. Why, then, do we get such an extravagant and over-heated interpretation of Protagoras' innocuous remark? The answer is that at this point Protagoras must be made into a straw man, and a strutting and ranting straw man at that. For Knox sees Oedipus in the first half of the play as a proto-Protagoras, and it is important for his purposes that Oedipus' "Protagoreanism" be soundly drubbed. Oedipus the radical humanist must be taught a lesson.

According to Knox, then, philosophers like Protagoras and scientists like the physician Hippocrates, whom he briefly describes, were challenging the Greeks' traditional ideas about the gods. "It was only natural," continues Knox, "that the poets who wrote for the theater in Athens should reflect in their plays this excited discussion of new and old ideas." Would that this were so! For it is a frustrating fact that with the exception of Euripides, they did not. The light that Aeschylus' and Sophocles' plays shed on the great debates of their days is both oblique and fitful; this may mean that the debates were not so great as Knox would make them, or it may simply mean that Sophocles was just not interested in the particular issues Knox has isolated from the intellectual life of fifth-century Athens. We have no independent information about what "side" Sophocles was on — or if he was on any side at all. Consequently, when Knox goes on to conclude the first lesson by asserting that Sophocles took the Oedipus legend and "made out of it a tremendous discussion of the great issue of the day — the conflict between the new outlook and the old religious beliefs," he is operating in considerable — and characteristic — advance of the evidence.

In his first lesson, Knox has made some rash and unfounded assertions. But granted that he is right and that Sophocles did intend this play as a testament of belief in an ideological dispute, we may still ask if the facts of the play support the interpretation that Knox subjects them to. The course of intellectual history of the fifth century is for scholars to quarrel about; the course of action in the *Oedipus Rex* is obvious to anyone who can read. And it is on the facts of this action that all our inferences and generalizations and conclusions ultimately depend.

Oedipus' Heroic Search

In his second lesson," The Character of Oedipus," Knox undertakes a reading of the play that is surprising, to say the least. He begins by claiming that in the search for Laius' murderer Oedipus has a choice. "He could stop the search for the truth at any moment. . . . The choice to start the inquiry and to continue it was his and his alone. It is Oedipus who drives the action of the play forward." In a way, this is true, since Oedipus is in charge of the investigation, but it overlooks the great turning point of the play, the arrival of the Corinthian messenger and his revelation that Oedipus is not the son of Polybus and Merope. The arrival is coincidental, the revelation is gratuitous, and neither is part of Oedipus' purpose. Before Knox became so impressed by Oedipus' heroic search for truth, "no matter what the consequences," he ought to have reminded himself that there are consequences, too, should Oedipus give up the search, consequences a lot more certain and almost

as terrible as continuing the search. For he would then be defying the oracle of Apollo and consigning his city to death by the plague. It is true that Oedipus is resolute and energetic in pursuing every clue to his identity, but there comes a point in his search where he is carried along on the tide of his own discoveries. Probably no one dares say when that point is reached, but surely that must be what makes this play so gripping: that every searcher reaches a point where he is, literally, the captive of what he is searching for. As the hunter nears the quarry, as the detective nears the suspect, as the scholar nears the truth, no one of them is wholly free, perhaps not free at all. The goal transmits its own hypnosis, exerts its own compulsion, and man is more fated than free. As Oedipus approaches the deadly mystery of his own being, he is trapped by it, and to ignore this double compulsion, from within and without, as Knox does, is to strip the play of its psychological riches.

The reason that Knox gives such emphasis here to Oedipus' will to know the truth is that he is already formulating a theory about Oedipus' character. Knox's Oedipus is an impassioned, radical humanist, confident of his own powers and skeptical of the gods, particularly of Apollo and his oracles. This is the kind of Oedipus who dominates the scenes that are enacted in this lesson, as Oedipus first speaks with Creon, then with Tiresias, Jocasta, the Corinthian Messenger (and why did Knox, in defiance of the text, turn this self-seeking lackey into a kind of Crazy Guggenheim?), and the Theban Shepherd. Through these scenes Knox can summarize the action of the play in this lesson and lead into his concluding questions. "Why does it happen? If this is not just a meaningless horror story, there must be a reason. What does the play mean?" These are reasonable questions, and it is gratifying to hear Knox reject as inadequate the familiar Aristotelian answer of *hubris* and *hamartia*, tragic pride and tragic flaw. It is not so gratifying, though, to hear Knox assure us that he will propose an answer that involves not only Oedipus but the gods as well.

Prophets and Prophecies

The scenes enacted in the third lesson, "Man and God," generally rehearse the action summarized in the second lesson, but this time they are preceded by a long discussion, by Knox, of the god Apollo and the place of prophecies in Greek religion. Prophets and prophecies, says Knox, are of central importance in the *Oedipus*, and if we understand how they function in the play, we will discover the "meaning" of the play. Perhaps we will (though I doubt it), but not unless we pay much more care than Knox does to what the play actually says. And we can start by questioning Knox's high regard for the priests of the Delphic oracle: "The record shows that although they made some mistakes they had a very high proportion of correct predictions." If by the "record" Knox means the collection of responses in Volume II of Parke and Wormell's authoritative *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford, 1956), then the record shows no such thing. It is even pointless to inquire about the correctness or incorrectness of the predictions, since the Delphic responses were notoriously vague, evasive, and ambiguous. Furthermore, as Parke and Wormell point out (p. 2), the Pythian oracle did not simply predict the future, as it does in this play, but instead gave advice to petitioners regarding their plans of action. Consequently, Knox's emphasis on prophecy, though it fits the facts of the play, does not describe the activity of the Delphic oracle as it was familiar to Greeks of Sophocles' time. And when commending the "record" of the Delphic oracle, Knox should not have failed to point out that Apollo's priests at Delphi

had also backed some rather bad horses. When the Persians defeated the Lydians, they were on the Lydian side; when the Athenians repelled the Persians, they were (until the last moment) on the Persian side; and in the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta that had broken out just before this play appeared, they were on the side of the Spartans. All of this makes very questionable indeed Knox's assumption that in this play Sophocles was out to defend the shabby record of these discredited "prophets."

But for all this, Knox is right when he says that all his life Oedipus tried to avoid fulfilling the oracle's prediction that he would kill his father and marry his mother. "The prophecies Oedipus was trying to beat were made by a god, and that means that the whole question of truth of religion was involved in his attempt to prove prophecies false." Here we must be aware of Knox's peculiar approach to the *Oedipus;* he sees the play as demonstrating the truthfulness of prohecies and therefore the "truth" of Greek religion. "The play is the story of a man who rejects prophecy and therefore religion, and who finds out that he was wrong." Why a man who rejects specific prophecies must also reject religion is a question Knox never considers; furthermore, Greek religion was a religion of forms and forces, not of creeds, or as Gilbert Murray once remarked, a religion of beauty, not truth, so it had few "truths" to be attacked or defended. Still, there is very little evidence in the play that Oedipus has anything but the profoundest reverence for Apollo and his Delphic prophecies.

Oedipus and Apollo's Prophecy

First of all, Oedipus took Apollo's terrible prophecy so seriously that he left his home and spent his life trying to avoid its fulfillment. And throughout the play Oedipus piously and persistently endeavors to follow the instructions he has received from the oracle at Delphi. We can go on to agree with Knox that Oedipus is "bold, progressive, critical" only if we add that Oedipus constantly puts these admirable qualities at the service of the god Apollo. It is very unsettling then to hear Knox say that "Oedipus believes, like Protagoras and like many of us, in the power of human intelligence to solve all human problems." If this insinuating statement is so, then why has Oedipus, at the beginning of the play, had immediate recourse to the oracle at Delphi? And how can Knox say that Oedipus "has a questioning and skeptical attitude towards the gods" when not once in the play does Oedipus say anything derogatory about the gods and when his entire life has been a witness to his devotion to Apollo? Knox's commentary then becomes increasingly remote from the play we read. "It was the fifth century that saw the beginning of modern medicine. And Oedipus in the play is presented to us as a doctor. Thebes is suffering from a plague, and Oedipus tries to find a cure." An oddly incompetent sort of doctor — to appeal at once to an oracle. Surely, if Sophocles were that much interested in making Oedipus a confident humanist and proto-scientist, why did he not show us Oedipus' bypassing Apollo (or ignoring his advice) and trying to cure the plague by his own means, his own wit and resources, just as he had answered the riddle of the Sphinx? Then Sophocles would have written the play Knox is talking about instead of the play he wrote, the play we have, a play in which the "beating" of prophecies is at best only a peripheral issue. Finally, it is not very reassuring to be told, as we then are, that the bedevilled Oedipus we know from the play, the Oedipus who has sent for advice to Delphi, the Oedipus who is in trouble from his opening lines and who suffers for himself and his people is a man who has assumed "the sta-

ture of man as lord and master of the universe."

In the middle portion of Lesson Three, Knox tells us to watch the players enact "a series of scenes from the play in which these attitudes of Oedipus are clearly shown." It is well to follow these scenes with the text at hand (even with Knox's own translation, published by the Pocket Library), because the scenes are either boldly edited or else do not reveal the "attitudes" that Knox cherishes.

The first scene we see runs from line 362 to line 398 — with one curious omission, 375-389. According to Knox, Oedipus in his quarrel with Tiresias is "claiming that his unaided intelligence is superior to the divine inspiration of the prophet of Apollo." Oedipus is doing no such thing. He is, instead, claiming that he with his human intelligence, was willing and able to help Thebes when Tiresias was not. He is not attacking divine inspiration or Apollonian prophecy; indeed, he seems to doubt that Tiresias has either gift, in view of Tiresias' conspicuous failure to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. Oedipus' tirade here is directed at Tiresias personally, at his arrogance, his pretensions, his motives past and present. This is all made very clear in the passage Knox cuts, in which Oedipus infers from Tiresias' behavior that he is in Creon's pay. All of this is in the omitted passage and is reiterated by Oedipus at the end of his speech (399-403), five important lines that are also not included in the film. Knox is so absorbed in his religious interpretation that he persistently neglects — even deliberately obscures — the politics of the play.

The next scene in the films, in which Jocasta describes the prophecy given to Laius in order to reassure Oedipus (698-725), is presented almost intact, with Knox suppressing only one line, again a reference to Oedipus' suspicion of Creon's political ambitions (701). Knox interprets this scene, particularly Jocasta's long speech (707-725), as a rejection of the prophecies of the god Apollo. "Now we shall see Jocasta the queen treat with the same contempt a prophecy made by the god Apollo himself." But again, Knox is not reading the text carefully. Jocasta is not nearly the freethinker Knox makes of her; in fact, she is careful to distinguish, in her speech, between Apollo and his priests ("A prophecy came to Laius once — I won't say from Apollo himself, but from his priests"), and both at the beginning and the end of her speech she stresses that it is human, not divine, prophecies that can be ignored. Blurring these distinctions, Knox goes on to the surprising conclusion, "The two of them reject not only the human prophet Tiresias but the prophecies of the god Apollo, and this means, as we have seen, that they reject the whole religious point of view."

Significance of Choral Ode

To substantiate his religious interpretation ("The play now makes that point clear"), Knox offers us a choral ode or, rather, part of an ode (883-910). This is the ode in which the chorus complains that if injustice rules and prophecies fail, then the gods are defeated and men need no longer worship at the shrines. This choral ode has long fascinated Knox, and he obviously finds in it the message of the *Oedipus*. "This states clearly the issues raised by the play. If the prophecies are false, then all religion is meaningless. . . . If the prophecies are lies, there are no gods." Two observations are in order. First, Knox has a right to see in this chorus the meaning of the play, but he should at least quote the entire chorus — the first antistrophe, for instance, seems to support (873-881) the old *hubris* theory that Knox has already rejected. Second, Sophoclean choruses are bad places to look for the morals of the story: not that they are not there, but that there are too many of them. Sophocles'

choruses represent the citizenry, the mass mind, timid, perplexed, perpetually attempting to shore up brittle fragments of conventional piety against the ruins that confront them. Within the plays they function dramatically, their instinct for compromise contrasting with the hero's passion for integrity. It is very appropriate at this point, where specific prophecies have seemed to fail, that the fragile faith of the chorus should shatter and that they should voice their panic that life has lost its meaning. Either all prophecies obtain, or there are no gods. This either-or thinking, this apocalyptic mentality, defines the shallowness and the poverty of the chorus' spiritual resources. Their perceptions are gross, and they can only assess the spectacle they have witnessed by such cataclysmic alternatives. Dramatically, this is perfect and the play would be poorer without the chorus. But it is certainly startling to find Knox so confidently sharing their simple-minded judgments, so blandly offering their desperate rationalizations as the "issues raised by the play."

But Knox is not yet finished with his interpretation. Next to come is the scene (929-979) with the Corinthian messenger, who informs Jocasta first and then Oedipus that Polybus is dead. Knox makes much of this scene, particularly of Jocasta's lines about living at random, which he somewhat strongly translates as to live "by hit and miss." Knox comments, "When Jocasta hears the news she is triumphant. Both she and Oedipus take it as a proof, a final proof, that divine prophecy is worthless." Oedipus hardly takes the news as a final proof since he first considers the possibility that his father may have been "killed" through longing to see him again, nor does he conclude that divine prophecy is worthless, since he at once commences to worry about marrying his mother. But if we are not all convinced that Sophocles' hero is by now a vaunting atheist, Knox offers us an explanation of Jocasta's "live life at random" speech. "According to her, the whole universe is a chaos without plan, order, or meaning, and the only way to live in it is unthinkingly, like a dumb animal." Oedipus an atheist, Jocasta a proto-atomist. This is an extraordinary interpretation to put on a speech that strikes most readers as a bitterly ironic (and temporary) exultation. Actually, Jocasta says nothing about the universe, chaotic or otherwise, nor does she advise anyone to live like an animal. All she says is that man must fearlessly make his way, as best he can, in a world of chance and vicissitude. Does this kind of world require that man live like a dumb, unthinking animal? On the contrary, such a world makes human thought and effort all the more necessary, all the more crucial. But it is very important for Knox at this point in the play that Oedipus and Jocasta be Wrong and Bad so that they can later be Shown Up by the events of the play. For the events of the play prove, says Knox, "that the prophecies were true, that there is a pattern in human events, and that there is beyond man's understanding a divine power and a divine knowledge." Knox is, understandably, very vague about this "pattern" he has discerned, and he is not at all embarrassed that this "divine power and divine knowledge" in the world of the *Oedipus* arbitrarily consigns innocent people to the most terrible fates imaginable. The gods are in the heavens, all's wrong with the world! But, nothing daunted, Knox finds in this cheerless prospect a message (for Our Times, one suspects): "His example teaches us that man's confidence in his own ability, great though that ability may be, is an illusion if he abandons the idea of God." How the Christian God entered here is anybody's guess, but Knox then concludes, "This is the meaning of the play: It is a tremendous reassertion

of the view that man is subordinate to God." *Amen.*

In concluding this lesson, Knox deals with what he takes to be an objection to his interpretation, namely that "it seems to suggest that all human action is fixed in advance." No, says Knox, confidently replying to an objection that is as irrelevant and factitious as his own interpretation, man does have freedom. Oedipus was free "to find out or not to find out the truth." We have already suggested that Oedipus' "freedom" is not so absolute or unqualified as Knox imagines, and at this stage there is probably not much use in inquiring from Professor Knox under what circumstances could Oedipus have suddenly suspended the search for Laius' murderer.

Divergent Interpretations

Lesson Four is entitled "The Recovery of Oedipus," and in it Knox maintains that the play is not a message of despair, since in the final scene Oedipus reasserts himself and recovers his initiative. The same old Oedipus, but with a difference. "He knows now that the gods know everything. He has learned that divine knowledge is greater than the knowledge of even the greatest man." Yet, in the final two hundred lines of the play, Oedipus says not a single word about these things he is supposed to have learned about divine wisdom. In fact, throughout this fourth lesson Knox's Oedipus is so widely at variance with Sophocles' that we can only wonder if he is reading the same play. Knox insists, almost stridently, that the Oedipus of the *exodos* is as proud, imperious, and impatient as the Oedipus who quarreled with Tiresias and Creon. This is a peculiar impression Knox has, particularly in view of the three long, pitiable, and self-lacerating speeches (1369-1415, 1446-1475, and 1478-1514) that dominate Oedipus' share in this portion of the play. But the reason that Knox gives for the recrudescence of Oedipus' old qualities is that this time they are enlightened, accompanied by a new awareness on Oedipus' part that he has become Apollo's spokesman and champion.

The scene that is supposed to exhibit Oedipus armed with the authority of Apollo is his final interview with Creon, from line 1422 to the end of the play. Knox has the players enact this scene in a severely edited version (omitting lines 1426-1428, part of 1455, 1463-1465, 1467-1515, and 1519-1522) and then comments on what he takes to be its implications. Of course, by cutting the very long passage, 1467-1515, in which Oedipus embraces his daughters, laments their fate, and begs Creon to protect them, Knox obscures the pity, the tenderness, and the agony of Oedipus as the play closes. But pity, tenderness, and agony will not serve Knox's partisan purposes; his Oedipus must be of sterner stuff, and as Apollo's champion, he must proselytize on Apollo's behalf. To show the new, Apollonian Oedipus in action, Knox fabricates an "argument" between Oedipus and Creon that is supposed to begin somewhere around line 1436 and the substance of which is what is to be done with the blind Oedipus. Knox comments, "It is Oedipus who now insists on the immediate fulfillment of Apollo's commands. Creon, the new king, wishes to delay, to make sure of what Apollo said. But Oedipus, who once cast such scorn on oracles and prophecies, now insists on the literal and immediate fulfillment of the god's command, even though it means his own death or banishment. The man who lived his life in defiance of Apollo's prophecy and denied Apollo's knowledge and power now turns into his champion." This is a most perfunctory argument, and Knox's comment misses its whole point, which is that the specific punishment Apollo proclaimed for the murderer of Laius was left undefined (100). Death or banishment, and Creon is

clearly uncertain of his duty (so is Oedipus) and determined to seek enlightenment from Apollo's oracle. Since this kind of reverence for oracles is what Knox has been commending throughout his commentary, it sounds strange to hear him now object to Creon's show of piety. Usually Knox argues against the text; here he is also arguing against himself. So, Apollo's command has been unclear, and Knox is unfairly weighting the text when he translates *apollunai* (1441) as "*death* for the unholy man" when it can also mean "destruction," that is, destruction of his citizenship by exile. Furthermore, by translating this word as "death," Knox runs into a contradiction with lines 1451 and 1518, where Oedipus explicitly asks that he be sent into exile. Finally, to deflate whatever remains of this pseudo argument, we hear no more of it in the remaining lines of the play except for a somewhat vague assurance by Creon (1519) that he will let Oedipus go into exile if Apollo approves. The fact is that there has been no argument worthy of the name and the shattered, blinded Oedipus nowhere speaks – or needs to speak – with the authority of anyone but himself. And for us, who as readers or viewers, have been the witnesses of his fate, Oedipus, who has learned the truth and dared to live with it, is himself the supreme authority.

Man of Destiny

But Knox is not content with this. His Oedipus must not only be a man of God, he must also be a man of destiny. "As he speaks with this new authority, there comes to him the feeling that he is a man of destiny, who is reserved for some strange and special end." Here we have interpretive translating at its unholiest. What the Greek says in line 1457 is, ["I have been saved for some (or "this") dreadful evil,"] suggesting, perhaps, the terrible doom of a lifetime's awareness of what he has unwittingly done to his father, his mother, and himself. But this will obviously not do, so in his translation Knox changes it to "for some strange and dreadful end." This is better: that pesky word "evil" is out of there and "strange" softens and deepens "dreadful." But still something is missing, some appropriate note of grandeur; so in his commentary Knox gets rid of "dreadful" and substitutes "special." There! "For some strange and special end." Exactly what that tiresome old Sophocles should have said!

Knox now goes on to conclude his commentary, reiterating his conviction that Oedipus "sees himself as the instrument of destiny, of the will of God." He makes much of Creon's words to Oedipus, at line 1522, "Do not seek to be master in everything." Knox: "It is an astonishing thing to have to say to a man who is now a blind, outcast beggar, helpless, and condemned to death or exile. Oedipus, who not long ago came out of the palace a broken man, now has to be sharply reminded that he is no longer King of Thebes." Blind beggar or not, most readers will not find Oedipus' "imperiousness" *uncalled for since he has* been asking only that he be allowed to keep his children – who, as we have seen, do not appear in the film. The point here is not that Oedipus thinks that he is king of Thebes, but that he knows that he is still father of his children. But again, as so often in the films, Knox has muffled the human appeal of the action. In his settings, for example, we see nothing of the sick city or of his suffering people. Knox's Oedipus moves vaguely among columns, his Apollo a grim god of prophecies, not the bright god of health.

And before we share Knox's harshness toward Jocasta, whom he seems to loathe, let us remember that she is a woman and devoted to her husband, and that she is not in the same position as Oedipus or subject to the same kingly pressures. If we commend Oedipus for snatching at straws, like the discrepancy

of numbers, we can hardly blame Jocasta for sometimes accepting oracles (853-854) and other times rejecting them (723), whatever their source, in her desperate attempt to reassure her troubled husband. But all this, the whole human contour of action, is lost in an approach to the play that turns dramatic reactions into reasoned convictions. Sophocles' characters have become ideologues.

The fourth, and last, lesson now ends with some stirring words by Knox to his audience. He reminds us that man is neither good nor best but lives somewhere between these two extremes, and he asks us if, in our twentieth-century probings into the riddle of the universe, we will be armed with the courage of Oedipus and with his readiness to endure unhappy consequences. Whatever our separate doubts may be about how — and if — the play posed these questions, these are sentiments we can all agree with.

Conclusion

The strictures in this critique have been severe, but Knox has dealt severely with the play. He has a right to his own interpretation, of course, and in his book, *Oedipus at Thebes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), he has further developed his interpretation, even extended it to maintain that Oedipus is symbolic of fifth-century Athens. This book is both eloquent and persuasive, though it has met with indifferent success among Mr. Knox's scholarly peers, who have made some of the reservations appearing in this review. But Knox's book and this film series are two different representations of the *Oedipus;* and it is a pity that audio-visual materials are typically immune from the type of criticism, good and bad, even- and ill-tempered, that ordinary publications endure. In both presentations, Knox has valid points to make. Both Oedipus and Jocasta do question oracles, do disbelieve them temporarily, and do find out that they were wrong. This is dramatic irony, and Sophocles is the supreme ironist, but to inflate an irony to the swollen proportions of a religious philosophy is a disservice to Sophocles as an artist. Also, the terms of the religiosity Knox finds confirmed in the play are inconsistent. We begin with the gods and end with God. What begins as a dramatic vindication of Apollonian prophecies ends as a doctrinal defense of Christian providence. From predicted fates to divine patterns. Now it may be comforting that the university professor from the Ivy League can assure high school students all over America that Sophocles was not only on the side of the gods but on God's side as well, but besides taming a powerful tragedy, it raises the specter — if that is the word — of Sophocles the enlightened bishop. This is not only anachronistic, it can get downright embarrassing.

The objections noted here are not meant to assume or imply an alternative theory of the play. This may not even be as optimistic a play as Knox supposes. When one reads Thucydides' account of the plague at Athens and considers that the *Oedipus*, itself dealing with a plague, was probably written soon after this dire event, it is hard to imagine a dramatist in, say, 429 buoyed by a solacing confidence in a divine pattern or purpose. But these are matters impossible to prove, even in spite of Knox's efforts. What is probably more important is that we not so relentlessly seek out or impose on students tidy little meanings. What Knox does in these films is to close down the Oedipus rather than open it up (those interested in an article that does seem to open up the play might look into James Schroeter's "The Four Fathers: Symbolism in *Oedipus Rex*," which appeared in *Criticism*, III, 3 [Summer 1961], 186-200); by offering an official-sounding and

eminently respectable interpretation he has tried to pluck out the heart of Sophocles' mystery. Again, Knox has a right to his views, however reductive or perverse or marginal they may seem to others. But it is quite another thing when his private views are enshrined in a pretentious (and expensive) series of films, lent the prestige of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and offered to unsuspecting teachers as the received interpretation of Sophocles' great tragedy. It is very difficult for teachers who have little familiarity with Greek civilization to defend against such a powerful combination. But defend they must: it is the obligation they have to their students as teachers; it is the obligation they have to themselves as thinking human beings.

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